

Meet the Artists: Through Our Lens

16 minutes

Produced by Impressions Gallery © 2022

Polina Kochetkova

This project I would say means quite a lot for me because lots of people don't ask you really what you think about, do they? They ask less opinions of younger ones because what can a young person say really? Nothing? [laughs] Nothing too special? But it's not right, isn't it?

Carolyn Mendelsohn

The project started as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. And the one thing that really concerned me was that there was nothing in the narrative about the young people's story. And I thought 'You know what? If I can find a way of working with young people to enable them to tell their story through photography of this extraordinary and quite frightening time... that would be amazing.'

I wasn't sure what to do, and then Bradford council put a call out to artists to respond to Covid-19. They had pots of money, the 'Response Grants'. And I thought about it and I thought 'you know... I don't want to do my story, but I have teenaged children, and I realised that their worlds had been turned upside down.'

Amy Lorrimer

I had my sixteenth birthday in lockdown. I only had two visitors to my birthday party which was my grandma and grandad [laughs]. I've always had a bit of an interest in photography, that's the reason that I found out about the project, because my dad knew that I liked it and he showed me this advertisement for it. But I've definitely got a lot more of an interest since joining the project and learning all the insides and out about photography. Yeah it was quite a big part of my lockdown... most days I would go out on walks and take pictures for the project and spend time editing them and sending them off. I'm really excited to see them in such a big form and having my family or friends be able to come and see them.

Carolyn Mendelsohn

The first meeting would have been in April [2020]. I had twenty young people from the ages of 12 to 19 from different parts of Bradford District. The most important thing is that they didn't need to have taken a photograph before. My thing was that they had a story to tell and their story was an important one. I created crafted workshops where I would introduce them to different genres of photography like documentary, portraiture, conceptual work, and then I would also encourage them to send me work.

It was really important they had skills. I thought, I'm not just going to send them out to take pictures within their bedrooms if they don't know the very basics of making images. So the very basics were composition, the rule of thirds, looking for the light, the connection.

Today we're gonna go through composition and light, and colour, and self-portraits.

I'm going to show you the work by a really brilliant photographer called Sarah Lee. Sarah is a photographer who does pictures for the Guardian newspaper and her work has been seen all over the world, she's a brilliant photographer.

That's her dog [laughs]. But little details like that, domestic details, are amazing. So she's got this picture, if you think about the composition... do you remember the grid that I was talking about? Well that dog is on that third almost. So.. the light, again, is probably the end of the day and it's coming straight into their flat.

When I started to receive images from the young people I was blown away. They made me cry because they were so... kind of raw and so of that moment and so much showing the containment they felt, with their individual viewpoints and individual voices coming through really clearly. I didn't know what to expect. And what I did within the sessions was shared a selection of the work that they sent to me and we put it under, you know, it might be about light or composition or story or ... we'd put it under different sections and then we'd talk about it as a group so I encouraged them all to feed back, what they saw in the image what worked in the image. So they became really proficient at analysing and looking at different work.

Was everyone blown away by this picture that Harry took? They're quietly blown away Harry. I'm sure people were, because I certainly was.

Harry Berry

There was a lot of trial and error, like.. umm I eventually ended up sort of balancing it in my fairy lights which are on my ceiling. Umm and then I just sort of placed a lot of stuff around my room because I wanted to encapsulate that feeling of having... feeling like you have so much work to do yet you have so much time to do it in but you still feel like you don't have enough time, and how it can all build, I guess, I don't know. But it was a lot of trial and error and a lot of dropping my phone on my face... [Carolyn laughs]... and ... yeah.

Carolyn Mendelsohn

I think it's really... it's really powerful, and it's quite moving and it's creative and I think a lot of people have commented to say that they understand it too. It's a very clear visual story that you've created, which is truthful.

Chester Jones

It was right at the beginning when it was nice weather and everyone was inside, I think that's when I took my self-portrait. I didn't take many photos to begin with because obviously it was quite boring to begin with and then Through Our Lens was sort of something to think about and do and practice and obviously it was enjoyable as well so it was a fun thing to be doing on the side as well as like online schooling and stuff like that. I'd like to say my photography skills have got better, I think so. My friends say that when they look through they can tell that I've gotten better which is nice. Just finished my personal statement, hoping to do photography at uni and hoping to maybe be a documentary photographer, photojournalist when I'm older. That's the dream.

Mahnoor Akhlaq

Before lockdown started I was studying and I was working so I was out almost every single day of the week, I was constantly meeting new people, and going from that to being stuck at home and not having that social interaction and... I usually interact with people more my own age but it was nice speaking to people who were younger than me and seeing how they were experiencing stuff and how they were coping with school and everything so it was nice, it was a good way of meeting new people and meeting people with a similar hobby as me.

I went on a walk, I went to Baildon Moor with my sister and my dad, and... going for a walk is such a normal thing, something you do every day, but at that time when being able to go for a walk was like a novelty and it was strange seeing signs up, like saying to maintain like the two metre distance and just signs about Covid like wearing masks and stuff, it's not something you usually see on your walk but I guess it's the new norm now, so I wanted to take a picture of that because it's not something you see every day I guess.

Before I did this interview I was thinking if anyone asks me why am I being interviewed today it's pretty cool to say 'Oh I'm being interviewed because my pictures are going to be part of an exhibition in a, like, art gallery', like it's a really big and special privilege to be part of the Through Our Lens project and to have our pictures in an art gallery because that's not something you get to say every day so it's pretty cool.

Morgan Foord

I never thought I'd have an exhibition at the age of 17, I think it's really good that actually the gallery's picked it up to give voices to younger people and it would be nice to see more of that in general on like the news and social media and things like that. During lockdown it was mainly just

a way for me to express how I was feeling. Obviously I wasn't at school I couldn't really hang out with my friends anymore. Even though we could do it through Zoom it just wasn't the same. And the project sort of gave me a comfort zone to do it all, and when I was on the project, speaking with Carolyn, speaking with everyone else it took my mind of things like the news and my own personal stresses.

Wigden Elagib

Before I joined through our lens I wasn't that interested at taking photography wherever I go. After I joined I became... I was thinking all the time at the views and what I see around me in the world. Anything that's like gets my attention... I take a picture directly of it.

When I found out there would be [an exhibition at] an Impressions Gallery I was so surprised and I was thinking 'Oh my god, my own photos will be shared with lot's of people', lot's of people will come to see my photos and they will think 'Oh it's amazing'. So I feel proud that they love it and... I am proud now.

This picture was in the lockdown. We weren't doing anything in the lockdown, just using the social media a lot. So these are my sisters, so they were just playing in their phones some games, and I found it quite [interesting] to take a picture of them to let people know how the life is during lockdown, like all the member of the family just playing.

Carolyn Mendelsohn

As an artist I have a relationship with Impressions Gallery, so they have exhibited my work. When I put the call out, the gallery and Anne McNeill shared the kind of flyer that I was sending and also said 'Yeah, please.. this will be great, a great opportunity'. The relationship with Impressions grew, and Anne McNeill and the gallery were really interested in supporting the work of the young people, and took a real interest in it and then also said, you know, talked about the possibility of exhibiting the work. I think really because the work was exceptional.

Amilah Majid

My image was of flowers in ice, and the idea was that the ice was slowly melting and that as the ice melted the flowers were coming out whole. The government was starting to talk about taking us out of lockdown and I just thought it was like a bit too soon, so in my image I just wanted to convey that if they just allowed us to slowly ease out of lockdown we'd come out OK, like the flowers were coming out whole out of the melting ice, but if they rushed into it, it would be like breaking the ice, the flowers would also break.

I found out about the project through my Textiles teacher, pretty sure Carolyn approached her and she passed the message on to me and asked if I'd be interested... so I was like, yeah, took up the opportunity, snatched it up... it was just like an opportunity for me to express how I was feeling

through lockdown like the emotions it was causing me to have so it was really nice. It was just a little spur of the moment kind of decision to join the group and it's taken me so far and given me opportunities that I never would have had anywhere else so it's amazing.

Carolyn Mendelsohn

Anne McNeill felt it was really important that they got involved in the process, that they started to understand how an exhibition is put together. So a group of them came along to help select the work. Really challenging when you think there were like a couple of thousand images and then we have to select a small amount. Anne and I laid the work out and then Anne gave them instructions about 'Ok let's look at portraits and let's look at this genre, and let's look at documentary', and they cut them down really quickly.

I think how the group have worked over the year and a half that they've been together is not to feel precious about their work but to see everybody's individual success as the group's success, which has worked really well.

Hamza Saraj

Basically, it was like a normal day and my teacher he emailed me about an opportunity for like a project. I wasn't really interested at first but I thought 'I'm bored in lockdown, what am I supposed to do', so I thought I might as well apply for it, and once I applied for it the rest is just history [laughs] yeah... it just went on from there.

Carolyn Mendelsohn

So Hamza sent me some of his photographs ... and I just think that is absolutely amazing. I love the depth of field, and what I mean by depth of field is that the focus is there and then that's blurry around. I love the colour, I think the composition is really interesting and it's just quite magical, the light is beautiful. Hamza took it on the phone, now I think that that picture is as good as Sarah Lee who is a famous photographer's picture, do people agree with me? I love it. You know, taking photos is ... not everybody's going to like your images, not everyone likes my pictures, but sometimes there are pictures that really stand out, and I think that's... just a moment.

Hamza Saraj

When I did photography before I was only doing it like at school, but now because of doing this project I'm doing it at home, when I go out, and at school as well. It's become a bigger part of my life than it was before. Like before it wasn't that big but now ... it's everything now.